

Italian doctors face criminal allegations over bribes

Fabio Turone *Milan*

More than 4700 Italian doctors, managers, and employees of the British pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) are to face allegations of crimes ranging from giving and receiving illicit compensation for prescribing or recommending a specific drug through to corruption and criminal association.

These allegations are the result of a two year investigation by the tax police in Verona (*BMJ* 2003;326:413). GSK itself is accused of fiscal fraud and corporate crime.

The inquiry involved all 94 Italian provinces and brought to light a complex monitoring system that allowed GSK's sales representatives to monitor prescription attitudes of each individual doctor closely. This enabled them to evaluate the "return" from the various forms of compensation distributed to doctors, which varied in importance in strict relation to their chances of increasing the pre-

scriptions of particular drugs. The most expensive antineoplastic, topotecan, for example, costs about €1800 (£1200; \$2195) per 4 ml phial.

"We have an 'extra-budget' allowing us to offer to oncology centres a contribution of around 400 euros per patient," reads an intercepted email entitled "War bulletin" sent by a district manager to his representatives. The alleged tax evasion for the period 1999-2002 amounts to €159m.

The police confirmed that GSK has been cooperating with the authorities since February 2003 and is now a completely different company after radical changes in the top management.

Several other investigations—targeting Pfizer, Sanofi, and Sigma Tau—are under way in various parts of Italy. And many suppose that GSK is not an isolated case: "It is just the tip of an iceberg," said Dr Vittorio Agnoletto, president of the Italian



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League Against AIDS (LILA) and former spokesperson of the Social Forum. "I have been denouncing practices damaging public health and patients, par-

ticularly in the field of AIDS therapies, for over 10 years."

Many specialists whose names were leaked said they received only funds for research and that they regularly invoiced for them, and Dr Giuseppe Del Barone, president of the National Medical Council for Physicians, Surgeons, and Dentists, criticised the clamour over the results of an investigation, well before a court verdict.

"Besides cases of straight corruption, the undue pressure by industry on Italian physicians must be denounced as well," commented Professor Silvio Garattini, director of the Mario Negri Institute of Pharmacological Research in Milan.

GlaxoSmithKline said it awaited full details of the exact allegations. The company said it had never released fraudulent tax declarations and say the directions it gave would make it impossible for such corruption to be widespread. □

German prosecutors probe again into bribes by drug companies

Jane Burgermeister *Vienna*

German prosecutors are investigating whether pharmaceutical companies gave bribes to hospital doctors to boost the use of their drugs.

Munich state prosecutors confirmed that they have searched the offices of a pharmaceutical company in the city, seizing files.

And according to a report in the regional daily newspaper *Westfalen-Blatt* (19 May), state prosecutors are investigating seven to nine pharmaceutical companies in Germany.

Raids were carried out on the offices of companies in Frankfurt and Darmstadt. Anton Winkler,

the press spokesman of the Munich state prosecution office, said that the investigation was still in its infancy.

"I cannot give any details yet, but the pharmaceutical company we are investigating in Munich is not GlaxoSmithKline Beecham," he told the *BMJ*.

He noted that an investigation opened against SmithKline Beecham in Germany in 1999 by the Munich state prosecutor, who started investigations into the activities of 4000 doctors accused of accepting bribes from Smith-Kline Beecham across the whole country. This was concluded this

week. Seventy one doctors in the city and dozens of employees of SmithKline Beecham have been accused of bribery.

In December 2000, the company merged with GlaxoWellcome to form GlaxoSmithKline.

The news of a fresh investigation into pharmaceutical companies comes at a time of growing concern about increasing corruption in Germany's health sector.

A report by a corruption expert—Frankfurt's state prosecutor, Wolfgang Schaupensteiner—says a third of all those who accept bribes work in the health sector. He said that the number of pharmaceutical and medical technology companies that have offered money or other illegal incentives to doctors leapt from 7.9% in 2001 to 14.1% in 2002.

One case made headlines this week when the head of the reha-

ilitation department of Munich's state health insurance (Allgemeine Ortskrankenkasse (AOK) Munich) company was imprisoned for four years and 10 months for having accepted bribes worth €260 000 (£173 060; \$316 890) from clinics since 1998.

Transparency International, an independent organisation, alleged that bribery and corruption in the German health sector costs taxpayers €10bn each year.

But Dr Ursula Auerswald, vice president of the German Chamber of Doctors, rejected the claims as "cheap, polemical, and self righteous."

"That these people do not provide concrete proof on a regular basis and do lasting damage to trust in the health service, is something that they ignore without any conscience," she said. □